

EMPLOYEE AS A STAKEHOLDER OF AN ORGANIZATION IMPLEMENTING THE EFQM MODEL – MODEL GUIDELINES AND THEIR PRACTICAL USE

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Purpose: The aim of the article is to present theoretical concepts aimed at perceiving employees as stakeholders of the organization, presenting the way this issue is treated in the content of the EFQM Model and illustrating with examples of activities carried out by organizations using this management tool.

Design/methodology/approach: The following research methods were used: a review of literature, both Polish and English, analysis of the content of the EFQM Model, examination of documentation submitted for evaluation by three organizations applying for the EFQM distinction based on the most demanding and comprehensive assessment scheme, and observation of processes related to employees in the three mentioned organizations.

Findings: Stakeholder theory still applies in today's world, and in the context of organizational needs, treating employees as key stakeholders is of fundamental importance. The EFQM Model is a management tool that precisely describes how to structure relationships with employees in the perspective of criteria, guidelines and the RADAR diagnostic tool.

Research limitations/implications: The limitation to generalizing the conclusions formulated in this article is the scope of the literature review and the fact that only three organizations were analyzed. Based on available sources, it was possible to present examples of actions, but it is not possible to draw conclusions about the effectiveness and efficiency of individual types of employee-oriented initiatives.

Practical implications: The presented examples of approaches aimed at employees as stakeholders in outstanding organizations may serve as an inspiration to develop this type of activities in any organization. The EFQM model is a tool that promotes the treatment of employees as key stakeholders and additionally provides solutions for both the implementation and evaluation of such activities.

Social implications: The well-being of employees in the organization translates into their positive functioning in society. In this context, the application of the presented solutions also has significance beyond the boundaries of the organization.

Originality/value: A new element is the presentation of a set of organizational solutions focused on employees in outstanding organizations using the EFQM Model. The article is addressed to human resources managers and top managers who want to improve the level of relations with employees.

Keywords: employee in the organization, key stakeholders, business excellence, EFQM Model.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

In a world where many organizations report problems with the availability of employees and their competences that do not match their needs, the way employees are treated in the organization becomes a significant problem. The employee-as-workforce approach seems to be becoming a thing of the past. When competing with other organizations for employees, it becomes crucial to implement subjective, partnership-based treatment of employees, i.e. recognizing them as key stakeholders.

One of the management tools recognized and respected on a global scale is the EFQM Model, in which this view of employee relations is present. The model provides guidance and inspiration, but leaves detailed organizational solutions to be developed and implemented by organizations.

2. Methods

The aim of this publication is to present a way of approaching the issue of treating employees as stakeholders in the perspective of the achievements of the world of science, criteria and guidelines of the EFQM Model, as well as presenting a set of practices used in organizations that apply to obtain EFQM distinctions as part of official external evaluation processes. The goal formulated in this way was translated into three research questions:

- RQ1: Do publications in the field of management describe the context of treating employees as stakeholders of the organization, and if so, how?
- RQ2: How are the issues of treating employees as stakeholders of the organization included in the EFQM Model?
- RQ3: What practices and organizational solutions are used by organizations that apply for EFQM recognitions based on the most advanced assessment scheme?

The following research methods were used: a review of literature, both Polish and English, analysis of the content of the EFQM Model, examination of documentation submitted for evaluation by three organizations applying for the EFQM distinction based on the most demanding and comprehensive assessment scheme, and observation of processes related to employees in the three mentioned organizations.

3. Results – The employee as a stakeholder of the organization

The names of concepts related to the role of employees in the organization, such as: "human resources management", "HR management", "human capital management" indicate that the organization has the leading power in shaping the relationship between the organization and its employees. This approach to the issue is natural, because without organization there could be no people in the organization. However, it seems that the names of the concepts mentioned above assume, in a sense, the objective treatment of employees in the organization. In recent years, however, the evolution of the approach to treating people in the organization as its stakeholders has become more and more visible. RE. Freeman (2015), who created the stakeholder theory in 1984, stated that the key thing for an organization is to create value not for the organization's owners (shareholders), but for the organization's stakeholders. This approach seems to be still valid, and clear thinking about the organization and its stakeholders and their joint role in creating value is now needed more than ever before (Phillips, Barney, Freeman et al., 2019, pp. 3-18). Although Stakeholder Theory is already 40 years old, as Bridoux and Stoelhorst (2022) state, the shift in strategic management towards appreciating the role of stakeholders is permanent and is related to companies creating value for humanity.

So who are the organization's stakeholders? The concept of stakeholders was introduced by the Stanford Research Institute in 1963 and initially defined "groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist", in a broader sense, stakeholders are any organizations or individuals that participate in the creation of a project (take an active part in its implementation) or are directly interested in the results of its implementation. There are internal stakeholders, i.e. employees, shareholders, supervisory board, and external stakeholders, i.e. customers, suppliers, competitors, state authorities, media, trade unions (Stakeholders - Encyclopedia of Management (mfiles.pl), February 22, 2024). This definition is focused on the role of stakeholders in projects, but it can be applied to the entire organization.

The above text shows that employees are internal stakeholders of the organization, and therefore have an active influence on its operation (e.g., through their work, they contribute to the creation of the organization's products and services, and also influence its results) and, on the other hand, are directly interested in the results organization (the success or failure of the organization translates into the level of employee well-being). A broad view of the role of employees in the organization as its stakeholders is reflected in current scientific publications. Chomiak-Orsa and Martusewicz (2023) indicate that one of the roles of the organization towards employees is to improve their competences through internal training programs, defining employee development paths, or creating individual development plans.

These actions can be considered in the context of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal No. 4 Quality education. The context of gender equality is also one of the important aspects of the contemporary perception of employees as stakeholders of the organization and is related to the implementation of Goal No. 5 Gender equality. It is worth noting that the UN Sustainable Development Goals are the basis of the EFQM Model 2020 (EFQM, 2020). Another aspect that highlights the role of employees as stakeholders in modern organizations is the issue of technological progress, automation and robotization. Taking employee development seriously is a necessity because the set of competencies needed in organizations implementing the Industry 4.0 concept is evolving towards greater interdisciplinarity. The importance of technical competences is obvious, while social and interpersonal competences and skills will be increasingly important (Stawiarska, Sz wajca, Matus ek, Wolniak, 2021). An additional aspect showing the evolution of the organization's needs in the area of competence is the need to create the so-called "green jobs" (Kozar, Sulich, 2023). We should also not forget about basic issues, i.e. participation in training and improvement courses (Ulewicz, Rosak-Szyrocka, 2017).

In addition to competences, employee awareness is also important. The higher it is and the more consistent the operation with the organization's goals, the better for building a quality culture (Rosak-Szyrocka, Krynke, Knop, 2017, pp. 7-8), which favors the perception of the organization's operation as an activity intended to bring good results not only to the owners, or the management staff representing them, but also to all stakeholders, including external ones. This formula of perceiving the role and place of employees in the organization can bring positive results because the support of all employees working in the organization is crucial for coping with problems, and without it the management staff has difficulties in achieving goals (Rogala, 2013, pp. 15-24). To achieve success in this area, it seems necessary to develop appropriate relationships and respect between management staff and employees (Grudowski, Wendt, 2018, p. 37).

Building employee engagement is also indicated as one of the key dynamic capabilities of the organization (Cyfert, Chwiłkowska-Kubala, Szumowski, Miśkiewicz, 2021). Managing employees simultaneously is one of the key gaps in organizations using the EFQM Model (Haerizadeh, Sunder, 2022). The results of research on scoring profiles of organizations assessed against the EFQM Model indicate that the best organizations are aware of the need to meet the needs and expectations of stakeholders, and the human factor plays a central role in the implementation of the strategy. However, this area can still be seen as room for improvement. Top-rated organizations stand out for activities focused on training, learning, and knowledge management (Periañez-Cristobal, Calvo-Mora, Rey-Moreno, Suárez, 2021). The use of the EFQM Model (and the Shingo Model) increases awareness and improves results in the area of sustainable development (Sá, Oliveira, Dinis-Carvalho, Santos, Silva, 2023). Research on the importance of intellectual capital in the context of company results conducted among 336 Czech enterprises, including 20 with EFQM recognitions, showed that those with

EFQM certificates achieve better business results. One of the key dimensions of the operation of these companies is the area of human resources (Yousaf, 2022, 2023).

The above considerations indicate that in today's management of organizations there is no place for treating employees as objects. The dominant formula should be to treat employees as an important stakeholder. The above-described advantage in creating positive business results for companies using the EFQM Model prompts a more thorough analysis of how the issue of the employee as an organizational stakeholder is addressed in the EFQM Model.

4. Results – Employees in an organization using the EFQM Model in terms of the model's criteria and guidelines

The EFQM Model 2020 is a tool derived from the quality management trend, but its application goes significantly beyond the traditionally understood area of product or service quality. After the last change to the model, which took place in November 2019 at the EFQM Forum in Helsinki, the EFQM Foundation published a new version of the model that is significantly different from the previous one. Changes in the context of human resources management in the EFQM Model between the 2013 and the 2020 version are described by Martusewicz and Wierzbic (2021). In the 2013 version, out of a total of 9 criteria, two of them directly related to employees. These were Criterion 2 People, constituting 10% of the Model's point value, and Criterion 6 People - results, with the same point value. It is clearly visible that the area related to employees was appreciated by the creators of the previous version of the EFQM Model, because it accounted for as much as 20% of the total score (EFQM, 2013). In the current version of the EFQM Model from 2019, commonly called the EFQM 2020 Model (EFQM, 2020), the authors of this tool approached the issue of stakeholders in a slightly different way. There is no direct reference to the organization's employees in the Model's graphics.



Figure 1. The EFQM Model 2020.

Source: EFQM Model (2020), European Foundation for Quality Management, Brussels.

The creators of the EFQM Model 2020 did not forget about employees, but they put this area of activity on an equal level with other stakeholders. Two criteria apply directly to stakeholder relationship management, namely Criterion 3 Engaging Stakeholders and Criterion 6 Stakeholder Perceptions. There are five stakeholder groups defined in the Model, and employees are one of these five groups. The importance of individual stakeholder groups is decided by the organization itself, however, the significance weight of each group cannot be less than 10% and greater than 40%, the grain of significance gradation is 5%. It is worth noting that this decision is crucial for the score obtained because it affects the score in the area of the two previously mentioned criteria. The total value of points in the criteria directly related to stakeholders is 300 (C3 Engaging stakeholders - 100 points, C6 Stakeholder Perceptions - 200 points). As one can see, the importance of employees in the context of scoring in the EFQM Model can be declared by the organization at different levels. In the minimum version, in which the organization does not perceive employees as important stakeholders, the total maximum number is only 30 points. (C3 - 10% of 100 points, i.e. 10 points and C6 - 10% of 200 points, i.e. 20 points). In a situation where employees are considered the most key stakeholder group, the possible number of points to obtain is 120 (C3 - 40% of 100 points, i.e. 40 points and C6 - 40% of 200 points, i.e. 80 points). Looking at the scores directly, we can conclude that the importance of the employee area has decreased in the latest version of the Model. However, it is worth taking into account that the remaining criteria of the Model also include elements related to employees (e.g. in Criterion 2 Organizational culture and leadership).

Taking into account the content of Criterion Part 3.2 People - Attract, Engage, Develop & Retain, it is worth noting that the Model defines employees as people or groups of people employed by the organization. From this perspective, this category of stakeholders also includes temporary employees or employees working "under the roof" of the organization, but formally employed by external employment agencies.

The Model's guidance points reflect best practices observed by the Model authors across organizations. Criterion Part 3.2 includes six tips on how an outstanding organization should operate in this area, so an outstanding organization:

- Develops a People Strategy and plans that support the overall Strategy and plans of the organization.
- Adapts to the evolving needs and expectations of its People, both current and future, taking account, for example, of changing expectations on Organizational Culture & Leadership, gender balance & parity, diversity & inclusion and the desired working environment.
- Enables its People – based on Purpose, Vision & Strategy – to understand the need for change and to see the opportunities for further development of their knowledge and capabilities.
- Empowers its People to communicate and to share effectively their experiences and learning with others in the ecosystem.
- Creates an ambiance in which its People can thrive, and their well-being is supported.
- Ensures its People are proactively guided, rewarded, recognized and cared for.

As part of activities related to the implementation of the provisions of Criterion Part 6.2 Employee Perception Results, an outstanding organization should collect and analyze perception results that include:

- The Culture of the organization.
- Their experience of working for the organization, including how change is managed.
- The organization's commitment and achievements concerning gender balance, parity, diversity and inclusion.
- The way the organization is adapting to future ways of working, for example, the co-existence of People working alongside robots, the use of artificial intelligence and augmented & virtual reality.
- The organization's support for family and personal life.
- The organization's support, empowerment, recognition and development.
- The working environment, pay and benefits.
- The management and improvement of personal performance.
- The reputation of the organization, including as a Leader in its ecosystem.
- Communication within the organization.

- Talent attraction and engagement.
- The way in which Strategy is executed, their contribution to it and their degree of confidence in the future direction of the organization.

It is also worth mentioning that in addition to the results of employee perception, an outstanding organization should also collect and analyze the results of its activities addressed to employees. In Criterion 7 Strategic and Operational Performance one find an indication that an outstanding organization should examine the degree to which the expectations of key stakeholders are met, and in relation to employees, the key topics are:

- Employee training and development.
- Employee management and appreciation.
- Occupational health and safety performance.

The above topics indicate what the priorities of an organization aspiring to be an outstanding organization should be, but they do not provide guidance on how individual issues should be implemented. The EFQM Model addresses this aspect through the RADAR (Results, Approach, Deploy, Assess and Refine) tool, which offers the possibility of analyzing the solutions used in relation to the guidelines listed in the Criterion Parts from the perspective of important performance attributes or results assessment (EFQM, 2020). Thus, in criteria 1 to 5 (including Criterion Part 3.2 Employees), it should be analyzed whether the approaches (organizational solutions) are rational and solid, aligned (to the strategy), implemented, flexible, assessed and understood, and whether the organization learns and improves approaches. In the criteria of the Results area (6.2 Results of employee perception and 7 Strategic and operational performance), an outstanding organization should ensure that the results are have the attribute of relevance (scope of results, connection with the strategy) and usefulness (currentness, credibility, segmentation). The next attributes against which results should be analyzed are trends, setting and achieving goals, comparison with other organizations, and future focus.

5. Discussion – Using the EFQM Model in the context of human resources management solutions

Practices and problems related to the area related to employees in organizations implementing the EFQM Model were observed by the Author of this publication during cooperation with organizations using consulting assistance or during internal and external evaluations. Due to confidentiality rules, the practices presented will not be associated with specific companies.

The EFQM model involves examining the perception of the organization by stakeholders, including employees, and therefore indicates that information should be obtained about opinions about the functioning of various aspects of the organization. During the implementation of the Model, as well as during internal and external evaluations, it is necessary to ask whether the collected data have the appropriate scope and are adequate to assess the organization's activities in this area.

A standard activity that fits into the context of the EFQM Model is employee engagement research and employee satisfaction research. When it comes to the scope of data, an interesting problem in large manufacturing organizations is the treatment of employees who work "under the roof" of the organization but are formally employed in temporary employment agencies or outsourcing companies. If an organization wants to meet the highest standards, the way it acts towards employees, training programs, and additional benefits should apply to all employees, regardless of who formally employs them. However, a dilemma arises, because one of the reasons for using the described forms of employment is the desire to increase employment flexibility and the ability to adjust the number of employees to the changing market demand, and therefore to the organization's changing demand for human labor. Engaging the organization's forces and resources in training and development, as well as ensuring equal pay conditions, may be economically unjustified for employees whose contact with the organization is usually very limited in time.

However, it is worth considering the extent to which the organization's actions towards temporary employees or those working formally for outsourcing companies translate into value for the organization. These people collect experiences and share their opinions with their acquaintances and friends, so the opinion about the company "goes to the world". Nowadays, companies are struggling with a lack of employees, so the opinion about how the company treats temporary employees is important. Therefore, it is worth knowing how the organization is perceived not only by the group of permanently employed employees, but also by people working on the basis of other forms of employment.

Another element related to scope and adequacy is the content of research questionnaires. In this case, however, a good solution seems to be to use the services of specialized companies that will conduct such research using their own methodology. This approach to employee opinion research has another advantage related to the usability of the data. It is to provide a research methodology that will ensure anonymity of employees. Conducting research by an internal HR unit in cooperation with the company's IT services is not perceived as a method that ensures anonymity and security for employees to express critical opinions.

Additional data attributes that should be noted are the possibility of analyzing them in relation to individual segments of the research sample. Average employee satisfaction levels can be misleading because some may be very satisfied and some may be very dissatisfied. It is therefore worth preparing the study in such a way that the results can be segmented. Another important aspect is the ability to identify trends in employee satisfaction. In order to

examine trends, it is necessary to ensure comparability of data between individual editions of the study. Observations show that the time interval for conducting employee surveys is usually one or two years. When deciding to implement the EFQM Model, it is worth considering choosing a research company that will conduct employee surveys in the long term. Choosing a provider of such a service every year or every edition will make it difficult to capture trends. The choice of the provider of this service should also be conditioned by the ability to provide comparisons between other surveyed organizations. The last aspect of performance assessment in the EFQM Model is the so-called future focus, i.e. an attribute that says that the organization understands cause-and-effect relationships and is able to identify key factors for future success. The issue of examining employee perception of the organization described above is basically universal for all organizations implementing the EFQM Model.

Criterion 7 Strategic and operational performance provides a bit more freedom in selecting the results for analysis and possible presentation during the external evaluation. In organization A, the indicators selected for presentation are: employee absenteeism rate shown in comparison to the average of all plants of the group, accident rate at work, total budget for social projects conducted by employees and interns.

Organization B showed the following results: employee participation rate in training (number of employees participating in at least 1 training to the number of all employees), number of days of employee absence, absentee rate in relation to the total budget of working hours, employee turnover rate, rate of reduction of the wage gap between men and women, employment rate of people with disabilities, employment rate of people taking into account race and ethnic minority affiliation, employment rate of people focused on equality towards sexual minorities.

Organization C indicated as the results: employee engagement rate, number of employees participating in innovative projects, number of employees participating in projects to improve competences and skills, female employment rate, number of employees working outside the home country, number of hours of employee training, number of applications for career development programs, number of hours of training in the field of ESG, number of hours of training in the field of ethics (anti-corruption training, DEI training - Diversity, Equity, Inclusion).

There are significant differences between the surveyed organizations in the selection of the presented results. They are a consequence of the fact that these organizations operate on different markets, both geographically and product-wise, are of different sizes and have different needs, expectations and capabilities in relation to employees. The common point for them is the fact that they operate in accordance with the guidelines of the EFQM Model and undergo external assessment. As with data related to employee perceptions of the organization, results in Criterion 7 of the Model are assessed through the prism of scope and relevance, segmentation, reliability, accuracy of data, as well as trends, goals, comparisons and future focus.

A slightly more difficult task is to describe the organizational solutions that were presented for evaluation by the three analyzed organizations. Organization A decided to include some of the most important approaches in its official description. These were the following solutions: linking the HR strategy with the factory strategy, inspiring working conditions, benefit programs, health management, a remuneration system offering above-average pay levels, an onboarding process focused on the organizational culture of the factory, leadership skills development programs, programs building agile work skills, competence development digital, especially aimed at employees 45+, recruitment of engineering staff, project management and networking in a global environment, language competence development program enabling cooperation with factories located in different parts of the world.

Organization B presented for evaluation such solutions as a personnel strategy and a strategy for building organizational culture (both of these strategies take into account the entire "life cycle" of an employee in the organization), processes for encouraging candidates to work, processes for integrating employees, processes for supporting employee development, supporting employees' needs in terms of health, safety and well-being, employee retention processes and preparation of talented employees in the context of succession plans for managerial positions, support when employees leave with particular attention to building skills to cope with subsequent professional roles.

The third surveyed organization presented the following approaches: "Employee employment strategy" closely related to the organization's goal, strategy and plans, "Attracting talent" (this approach consists of employer branding activities, ensuring flexible work organization, technical and managerial competence development programs), employee engagement (detailed activities in this area include employment planning, onboarding program and support through a dedicated person (Buddy), initiatives related to Diversity & Inclusion, internal communication, birthday leave, informal meetings with the top management of the organization, employee reward ceremonies, pay conditions and benefit sets, organization service guide for employees, paid long-term leave (sabbaticals), preparedness programs for natural disasters, internal community development programs aimed at connecting people with similar interests and predispositions, projects on defining critical roles and talent, assessment of organizational culture and leadership, online training platforms, training programs tailored to the needs of individual departments, technical competence development programs, programs focused on volunteering, loyalty programs, monitoring the level of attractiveness of employee remuneration, programs offering a change of job position within capital group and geographical locations, work-life balance initiatives (including psychological, legal, financial, medical and dietary support, as well as veterinary support for employees' animals), social initiatives and initiatives related to the well-being concept (company club, internal sports competitions, New Year's parties, company picnics, healthy lifestyle seminars), medical clinic, sports center.

The analysis of employee-focused initiatives indicates different levels of organizational involvement in this area of activity, with organization C being characterized by a very large range of programs and initiatives. However, it is a specific organization, operating in many industries and on many markets, which creates additional challenges in activities for the benefit of employees.

6. Summary

The article presents the concept of treating employees as stakeholders of the organization. The literature review showed that, despite many years since the development of stakeholder theory, it is still applicable in today's world, and in the context of organizational needs, treating employees as key stakeholders is of fundamental importance. The EFQM model is a management tool that precisely describes how to structure relationships with employees in the perspective of criteria, guidelines and the RADAR diagnostic tool. The article details Criterion Part 3.2 People: Attract, Engage, Develop & Retain and Criterion 6 Stakeholder perceptions in the employee section. The author consciously refrained from describing Criterion 2: Organizational culture and leadership, because the volume of the article would not allow for a sufficiently detailed treatment of this part of the EFQM Model.

The following section presents the results of the examination of the documentation submitted for evaluation by three organizations and the results of observations made by the author during the evaluation process. The practices used by the three surveyed organizations in the employee-related areas of the EFQM Model are described. Additionally, the attributes of the RADAR tool are described, which allow for a broader perspective on "how" individual organizational solutions are to work. The answers to the research questions included in the introduction are the content of the three subchapters of the article and thus contribute to achieving the purpose of the article formulated in the introduction.

The limitation to generalizing the conclusions formulated in this article is the scope of the literature review and the fact that only three organizations were analyzed. Based on available sources, it was possible to present examples of actions, but it is not possible to draw conclusions about the effectiveness and efficiency of individual types of employee-oriented initiatives. The content of the article may therefore serve as an inspiration for further research aimed at, for example, identifying the most widely used solutions and their effects for organizations and employees.

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